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WANTED: CHURCH STATESMANSHIP

BY THE REV. NEWMAN SMYTH

IN a company of English Churchmen the remark was recently made that the established Church of England is at present in a state of unstable equilibrium. With equal truth the same observation might be made of all existing ecclesiastical orders. But in religious as in political history a condition of unstable equilibrium is not necessarily an indication of approaching dissolution; it may be the antecedent of a more excellent reconstruction. Such a critical time alike in Church or State calls for statesmanship equal to its opportunity.

It is one of those frequent coincidences, or parallel developments in history, which are suggestive of some large, strategic Providence, that while the times are preparing a people for some great change the men also are in the making for the eventful hour. It is, therefore, a question of present concern whether the Church has in training men who shall appear as chosen leaders in the coming day. For the signs of another age are already above the horizon; and it is evident that if Christianity is not to lose mastery in the life of the people, it must rise clear of existing divisions and sectarian confusions; and the question is becoming urgent, are there men of light and leading in its different communions great enough to put behind them mere ecclesiastical policies, and prophetic enough to discern and to master the forces which are gathering and waiting to be organized in a catholic and puissant Christianity?

At the threshold of the coming era of the greater Christianity lies the old, worn question of the reunion of Christendom. Its solution cannot be much longer postponed if the Christ who conquered the old world that crucified Him is indeed to become Master of the modern nations that would pass Him by. Above all, in the English-speaking race, with

its large responsibility for civilization throughout the world, it is high time that the internecine conflict of the Churches should be ended; for it is clear that a whole Church is demanded for the whole world; and the world-wide work of Christian civilization cannot be accomplished by a disorganized religion, wasting its energies in a struggle for existence between its parts. In our own country and in England, until the several ecclesiastical cells and organs shall be brought into some vital working unity, it will continue to be impossible for the Church, when confronted with any moral issue, to represent the religious power in its totality, and it will remain an idle assumption to speak of a really national or an American Church.

When one looks for signs of religious statesmanship among the churches, there are certain quarters in which the search is in vain. Nothing, for example, may be expected from an isolated individualism or a rarefied liberalism. Life requires universal and positive air. The people may show, indeed, little thirst for spiritual truth, but they hunger for a religion of social equity; and a hard, crystallized individualism in religious beliefs is not easily soluble in a social Gospel. Nor is a negative liberalism or "undenominationalism" to be regarded as in itself catholicity; that is, comprehensive of positive vitalities and faiths. In the progressive development of one's personal creed there are three possible degrees of excellence: the positive may be some inherited or traditional belief, the comparative virtue may be a more liberal doctrine, but the superlative excellence is catholicity—that large-minded and full-orbed faith, of which in its rich possession of the historic life and creeds of the Church it may be said, "All things are yours." Religion in New England had its early period of orthodox dogmatism, and it has been passing through its consequent reactionary period of liberalism; neither of these stages of development reaches the culminating epoch of historical comprehension, of intellectual and spiritual fellowship in the faith of all the saints—the harvest season from many white fields.

If on the one hand no strong note of leadership may be expected from mere theological liberalism, on the other hand no rallying call for different Christian communions can come from Churchmen of the uniformitarian type in whatever Church they may seek to prevail. There are such

Churchmen in every denomination, differing widely in their exclusive theories of the Church and its offices, but alike in this that they would reduce Christianity to the minimum terms of their own ecclesiastical tradition. This uniformitarian kind of Churchmanship betrays the same mental habit and limitation wherever it may be found; not infrequently it marks the arrested development of young clerics. It were easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for this denominationalist to enter into the kingdom of a united Christianity. Even when the Christian sentiment of a whole community is stirred by the visitation of a high ideal of united service, as the Pool of Bethesda was troubled by an angel, the uniformitarian Churchman seems impotent to throw himself into the movement to be cured of his long-standing sectarian infirmity.

Even more inefficient than these extreme dispositions is a common attitude which may be broadly characterized as a pseudo-practical habit of mind. It is, of course, practical to seek to do what can be done to-day; but it is a false and barren practicality not to include some ideal in every day's work. Now just this common regard for that only which seems to be immediately practical is largely responsible for the religious and moral inertia which postpones to the millennium many things which right-minded people might begin to get done now on the earth. But the practical idealist holds it to be an essential element of the Christian faith to believe that the thing which ought to be is the thing that can be done, and consequently he holds it to be an integral part of religious duty for the Christian Church to work every day to have the right things done.

There are two assumptions from which the pressing problem of Church unity may be approached; one is that real unity is an impossible vision, and therefore we must make the best of our divisions. The other is that real unity is not a hopeless problem, and therefore we should make the least of our divisions. There are also two prevalent states of feeling in this matter; one is the disposition to hold fast all that we have received; the other is willingness to sacrifice all that we can. But the duty to be fulfilled is a double service in which these conflicting sentiments may limit and correct each other; for it is the Christian obligation both of giving and of receiving whatsoever things in all the churches are true and of good report. The sectarian spirit

is more willing to give than to receive, but in the spirit of unity all Christian bodies are alike to give and to receive, and no one merely to give up to another.

The practical man, who can have some clear vision of better things to come, although he would not be a visionary, may raise at this point the pertinent inquiry, what is there in present conditions to create or to encourage any such statesmanship, to make men believe enough in Church unity really to work for it as something that may be brought to pass possibly in our generation? It might be inspiring answer enough to quote words which an honored leader of the Episcopal Church, who had worked for over a quarter of a century for the peace of the churches, the late Dr. Huntington of New York, wrote in a letter shortly before his death: "We may well be content if in the opening years of this century we may have any part in a movement which is sure to triumph before its close." Many tendencies from different quarters converge towards this conclusion. It is true that in almost every generation since the Protestant Reformation laudable efforts have been made to heal the lamentable divisions of Christendom, and all have failed. Political causes, the dominant relation of the State to the Church, and consequent persecutions, as well as dogmatic controversies, in the storm and passion of the times silenced these irenic voices and left on the Church, together with our priceless heritage of liberty, the seams and the scars of the conflict. But these divisions are now anachronisms, obstinately persistent in many quarters, it may be, but they are not the living sentiments, potential for the future, actuating now the great mass of Christian people. The political causes of ecclesiastical strife in this country at least have long since ceased to exist. The field is open for the Church to show its united strength. In a free country, in a democratic age, unity and administrative organization no longer expose the Church to any appreciable peril of another imperial hierarchy. The harbingers of the peace of the churches, whose sweet notes in other days were sung too soon, have now their hour in the dawn of this century of the greater Christian faith and hope.

Besides the rising tide of Christian sentiment, which is submerging all along the shore the rocks and shoals upon which previous efforts to gain Church unity have been wrecked, the universities, where scholars of all denomina-

tions are met, are making notable contributions to the unification of the churches. Sharply divisive theories, for example, of the Church and its ministry, such as the Tractarian theory of sole Apostolic succession, or the equally high Presbyterian and Congregational claims of the Apostolic sufficiency of their favorite polities, are undermined and carried away in the prevalence of modern critical and historical studies of the origins and development of Christian institutions. The partisan claimant of an exclusive Divine authority for his Church order would be hard put to it to gain standing in the supreme court of modern Biblical and historical scholarship. Different theories concerning the origin of the Church, forms of worship, or orders of the ministry, which may be logically antithetic, are not necessarily vital incompatibles, or incapable of assimilation in a comprehensive charity. The various modes and temperaments which may be indicated by the several Church designations are diversities which may be conserved in a rich unity. The break between them has resulted because the special character or excellence indicated by the Church adjective has been hardened into a substantial *ism*; it is not the special part or organ of the whole body of Christ's Church which is indicated by the words the Congregation, the Presbytery or the Episcopate, but it is Congregationalism, Presbyterianism, Episcopalianism—in each case the *ism* of it—which has become in its claim of exclusive authority from Christ and His Apostles unhistorical, unapostolic and un-Christian.

A great force which has to be reckoned with in any present religious leadership is the student's movement and its increasing volume of consecrated power. Notably also the world's missionary conference, recently held in Edinburgh, was a sign of the new age written so large that it would seem that only one born ecclesiastically blind could fail to see it. And all around the churches in every community there exists much undeclared, unorganized and often unconscious religious feeling and energy, especially among the young, waiting to be called forth by a leadership large and noble enough to inspire its utmost devotion.

Not to mention in detail other encouraging indications, a single memory, and its suggestion for our purpose, may be enough to set aside any inert unbelief in the possibility of doing away with the shameful divisions of our churches,

whenever we really set about it. Those who were born early enough will have a vivid recollection of the party divisions, commercial hesitancy and seemingly irreconcilable differences of opinion which prevailed in the North just before the outbreak of the Civil War. And they will also remember, as though it were but yesterday, that eventful morning when the news that Fort Sumter had been fired upon made in a moment a solid North. With such memories, it is easy to believe that in the Church as well as in the State seemingly irreconcilable differences might be fused and welded as one religious patriotism in the flame of some glorious consecration. Suppose then that some supreme occasion, as commanding as was that call to a people by the firing upon its flag, should summon the churches at once to forget their strife and to obey the Lord's word that they be one;—is there any doubt what the response would be? It would be done so quickly that men might wonder why it had not been done long before.

The analogy from our national history may be carried still farther. It may serve also to allay the fear, still entertained by some, that any movement towards substantial Church unity would issue in another hierarchical autocracy, like Roman Catholicism, rather than press on towards the ideal of the true Catholicism, which, like the Jerusalem which is from above, shall be free. They forget in such inherited Protestant apprehension that Roman Catholicism was a development of the Church in the mould of the imperialism of the times; the Catholicism of the future, the Holy Catholic Church, in which there are many folds, is developing in the mould of democratic constitutionalism. Here our national unity is illuminative. The Union, which was created and saved at so great cost, has become indeed a nation, but it has not destroyed democracy. Home rule is not lost, State rights are conserved under a strong Federal unity. Why should the churches be less able to preserve their local autonomy and spiritual freedom, though they should similarly be bound together and in their federated totality have power for all good, extending to the missionary ends of the world, which singly and in their wasteful competitions they can never exercise? Or must we confess to the end of the chapter that the children of this world are wiser in their generation than the children of light?

When we acknowledge that reunion of the churches is a

practical problem and inquire what we may begin to do about it, it will be well to recall the military distinction between strategy and tactics; for in this advance of the churches both are to be regarded—the grand strategy of faith, comprehensive in its plan as it is single in its aim; and the tactics of each day's effort, studious of details and quick to seize upon any point of vantage.

In the broad, strategic ideal it is evident that nothing less than full intercommunion between all Christian churches, and nothing short of economic and efficient administrative organization can meet the religious demand of modern civilization. For ours is not merely the age of democracy; it is the dawn of a new era of social co-operation. If individualism is not to be swamped in some devastating flood of socialism, it will be because the individual shall be saved in a Christian fellowship and co-working. For purposes of co-operation a federation of churches, like "a gentleman's agreement" not to compete with one another in the same field, may be provisionally useful in many localities; but a fast and loose series of dissolving combinations offers no permanent solution either of the economic or religious problems. The ideal of Church unity—the strategic plan—is comprehension of diversities; not uniformity, but conformity of one to another and of all the members together in a common service, as one body doing and getting done the Lord's will on the earth.

It needs to be repeated, until misunderstandings shall cease, that this plan does not mean the swallowing-up of one church by another; that it is not uniformity, but unity. A socialistic Church uniformity would not fulfil the ideal of one Christian society. It would be a contradiction of human nature to seek to reduce the churches to a single selected type, as it is a denial of the real Apostolic succession—of the actual historical continuity of the whole body of believers which is the Church—to assert of any one organ or special function or part of it that it alone bears the mark and is essential to the integrity of the true Church. Its continuity and authority have been and are in the life of the Christian society as a whole; the wholeness of the Church is resident in the body of believers. Now it is just this wholeness of the Church which needs to be rendered visible and realized in practice; and the essential sin of schism lies in any assumption which prevents the wholeness of the

Church from being realized in practice; it will fail of perfect visibility until in any of our cities it may be said of every Christian cause and good work, as it was said in Apostolic days, "Being brought on their way by the Church" in Antioch.

We turn, then, to inquire what tactics may be at present available in this great forward movement? Some immediate efforts are suggested as practical steps when it is once clearly seen that the end directly in view is not merely to manifest the unity which may exist to some extent outside the churches, but to bring to effective realization the unity which is within all the churches. For the unity is already there in principle and in the historic life of Christianity; the problem is to bring it out into actual, unmistakable visibility and to render it the effective force of the Christian faith in the world.

Two tactical measures in particular are suggested by present conditions. One, and that hitherto most in favor, is interdenominational approach along the lines of least resistance. Federation of Christian men and women outside their different Church relations for service in various ways and other means of fellowship in good works are desirable; only these and all similar approaches are to be regarded as way-stations and not as the terminal of Church reunion. Encouraging and helpful for further advances as are the gains already won at such points, they are as yet but minor successes in comparison with the greater work of faith to be achieved in overcoming the two chief schisms which have been received as our unhappy inheritance from the past—the great gulf between the Roman Church and all Protestant communions, and the isolation from each other of the Episcopal and the non-Episcopal churches. Hence the other tactical method just suggested would lead to attack upon the problem where the resistance is strongest, and to all possible concentration of the forces of Christian love at the points of greatest importance. For whatever gratifying successes may be gained along other lines they will be at best but preparatory gains, and the final issue will not be achieved until these outstanding and most formidable divisions of Christendom shall have been providentially overcome.

The final reconciliation between Rome and Protestantism lies as a hope beneath our present horizon; the Modernist

movement, forbidden but not suppressed by the Vatican, may open the way to some future approximation between a Roman Catholicism, reformed from within, and the Protestant world; but, leaving this outlying issue to some larger Providence than we may know, there is enough within sight and hope to be done in hastening to its end the internecine conflict among the heirs of the Reformation. The last Pan-Anglican Conference in London lifted up the true idea of Church unity in these words, "Not compromise, but comprehension; not uniformity, but unity." This is a rallying-flag around which we all may gather; no better call and watchword for all the churches could be given. The same conference took a practical step in the right way when they recommended that conferences between different Christian bodies be held for the purpose of mutual understanding. Such conferences concerning even the most traditionally obstinate differences have already been found to have in them surprises of conciliation. For such hopeful issue, indeed, there is no further use either for the religious paper that lives by its denominationalism, or for the polemical divine who stands ready at the slightest provocation to fire off his resounding ammunition. The times are ripe for concessive rather than controversial discussion of all differences between Christian bodies of every name. The controversial divinity of the past may well be left to bury its dead by the Church that would obey the Master's word and follow Him into the future.

In this spirit conscientious difficulties about the creeds are to be surmounted. Concerning the use of creeds, two things, which are often confused, should be distinguished. How much of the historic faith of the Church an individual communicant may be asked to confess is one thing; what the Church has to confess to him is another thing. The least measure of faith may be enough for an individual to bring to the altar, but the Church has to receive him into the full fellowship of the faith of all the saints. Its historic creeds mark the continuity and the development of its faith throughout the Christian ages. It would not bind them as fetters upon this generation; it holds them aloft as banners. The historic creeds are symbols of its faith. They serve to declare what has been the mind of the Church from age to age. Taken all together, they mark the way of the development and adaptation of the faith in the ever-changing con-

ditions of human knowledge and thought from the beginning until now. They are standards of doctrine, like the several corps colors of one army; they are not to be held as though they were fortified walls of hostile camps. The historic creeds are made obstructive and divisive only when they are enforced verbally as legal contracts, rather than confessed religiously as the individual's part and heritage in a goodly fellowship. They cannot, indeed, be held honestly by many if they are to be interpreted in the strict construction which a court would require of the criminal law; we may accept them as a common ground of co-operative faith when it is made clear that we receive them as embodying great constitutional principles of the Church, by no means perfect or the end of all wisdom, and needing to be adapted to the knowledge and life of each succeeding age. This is only to hold both that the living Church is the loyal heir of its whole past, and also that it cannot be bound forever by the dead man's hand.

Attempts which occasionally have been made to escape modern credal difficulties by some short cut, as, for example, through some simple new creed, usually have reached slight success; they are apt to end either in some meaningless phrase or else in their partial selection of received truths, by the very emphasis thus put upon them, to provoke assertion of other truths which have been omitted. The task which the Presbyterian Churches of Scotland are now laboring over of formulating articles of doctrinal agreement, might seem more easily to be accomplished if both bodies were content to affirm their line of common descent as marked by the ancient and the later Protestant creeds. The one historic Church has had many creeds, but it is one flock in these many folds. Since the Apostle Peter's first personal confession of faith it has never been a creedless Church; it has too positive and vital a gospel to survive in our day upon thin platitudes and negations. But in the frank and full recognition of the principles of development, of symbolic expression, and of ever-fresh interpretative adaptation of beliefs to the thought of the age, the unity of the teaching Church and the fellowship of faith are to be preserved until faith shall pass into perfect knowledge.

Moreover, concessive conferences, such as the Anglican Bishops have recommended, may render it in time quite possible to discover a way around or over the chief cause of

separation between the Episcopal and all other Protestant communions—the isolation of their pulpits. When it shall be generally recognized that this wall of separation is built upon theoretical grounds, some practical means of removing this cause of offence may become possible. We have marked time full long enough before this obvious obstacle, that high sacerdotal and low Congregational theories as to valid ordination are antagonistic and as theories of the ministry irreconcilable; but it does not follow, and it is too lightly assumed, that those who would hold fast to either of these extreme theories can find in fact no common ground upon which they may exercise a mutually recognized ministry. There are, indeed, some historical precedents, too long overlooked, which upon full concessive consideration may indicate ways in which this incongruity of theories of the orders of the ministry, and of what is to be required for regular ordination, may be brought to some satisfactory solution, if at least Christian reasonableness on all sides does not fail in the discussion. But so long as the sacerdotal Churchman, on the one hand, maintains as binding upon all of us his theory of Apostolic authority, and, on the other hand, the independent Puritan stands fast glorying in his theory of the autonomy of the local church, as in itself all-sufficient, each dogmatizing against the other, and both forgetting that neither Peter nor Paul had anything to say explicitly about the high church ideas of either of them; then the present irritating and deplorable separation of ministries, alike approved by their fruits, but without recognition of each other, might be kept up until its day of judgment shall come.

Without entering here into detail as to these precedents and possibilities of reconciliation, it may prove a surprise to many to indicate how slight are the mutual sacrifices which may be required to find a basis in practice for this most desirable reconciliation. Indeed, not to offer other suggestions, the alteration of a single word in the alternative form of the Episcopal Ordinal might enable a Congregational clergyman without self-stultification or denial of his previous ordination vows to accept the additional consecration of a Bishop together with such additional jurisdiction as it might confer. The alteration merely of the word "*the*" to "*this*" in the essential clause of the form of ordination, "Take thou authority to execute the office of a Priest in

the Church of God,” would open a straight, though narrow, way through this difficulty. The addition of a single word to the creed was enough to determine the great schism in the ancient Church between the East and the West. Shall the difference between two letters of one word prove enough to keep apart the English mother Church and all her dissenting children?

The recent simultaneous action of two large religious bodies in this country has great promise for the coming unity of the Church. The General Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church, which was held in Cincinnati in October last, appointed a large and representative Commission to arrange as the “next step towards unity” for a conference of Christian communions throughout the world. At the same time the National Council of the Congregational Churches in Boston appointed a committee, as their representatives, to consider any overtures that might come to them from the Episcopal Church. The noble language in which the call of the Episcopal Church to other Christian communions is conceived, as well as the spontaneous response at the same time by the Congregationalists—the two messages passing each other on the way—lift the whole movement up to a high plane of endeavor, while the work of the Commission will at once give to it definite efficiency and practical aim. Time will be needed; but with statesmanlike wisdom and patient persistence on the part of representatives of the churches in the proposed conferences a beginning of the end of the divisions of the one Church may be made, and the Christian people of the world be providentially led on and on to happier issues than a year ago any of us might have dared to hope.

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